Objectives: This section will discuss oral/verbal communication, specifically presentations. By the end of this section, you should have a sound understanding of:

- basics requirements for successful oral communication;
- importance of preparation for oral presentations;
- use of external aids, and
- managing nerves.
Preparing for an oral presentation

Have you ever been witness to a badly prepared oral presentation? If not, consider yourself fairly lucky. It can be a traumatic experience - painful for both presenter and audience. Equipment not working, lost notes, technology that is not appropriate for the audience, lack of research by the presenter, a hostile crowd. It is, however, quite easy to ensure that you are correctly prepared for oral presentations. The only area outside of your control is the context in which you are speaking; content, structure, language, visuals, performance, and audience involvement can be controlled by you (Wallace, Schirato & Bright, 2001, p.210).

Planning

Prior to any presentation, you need to consider:

• Who are my audience? This may affect your dress, your manner, language.
• What is my environment? This may affect your use of technology.
• What environment do I need? Your presentation may require moving around a large site (eg. tour). This requires specific logistical organisation.
• What resources are available to me? This may include refreshments, technology, personnel, depending upon how complex your presentation is going to be.
• What resources do I need? You may have specific requirements, for example a data projector and a lap top, that will require booking or hiring for the presentation.
• What can I expect? You should be able to anticipate the reaction of your audience and prepare accordingly. Launching an exciting new product may elicit an entirely different response than announcing a takeover.
• Do I need to conduct research? The answer to this is always going to be yes, no matter how minimal. You need to be as well prepared as possible for that curveball question that just may come from the audience.

Consideration of the above questions will help you decide upon the most appropriate type of presentation. At that stage, you can then focus on the finer points.

Use of visual aids

Aids available to you may include data projectors, black/whiteboards, overhead projectors, slides, models, flip charts, video/audio, felt boards and so on. Using audio-visual aids can add to your presentation; however, if you are going to use aids, ensure that:

• you are comfortable and familiar with the technology;
• they ADD to your presentation, rather than overshadow the information;
• they will not disrupt the continuity of your presentation;
• if projecting onto a screen, that the display is focused and visible to ALL members of the audience.
Notes
Your use of notes can range in detail from almost a fully written speech, to hand held palm cards. Some particularly experienced speakers often speak without notes, which is extremely effective, but can be dangerous. Points to remember with notes are:
• you can easily lose your place;
• make sure they are numbered so that if you drop them, they can be easily reorganised;
• don’t substitute using notes for practice - you should have rehearsed your presentation, and notes should act as a means of keeping you on track, not supporting your whole performance.

Microsoft PowerPoint is a software increasingly used for technical presentations, and if correctly constructed, can serve as your notes. The software also allows you to create notes within the program that are not visible to the audience.

Your presentation
‘Speed, volume, rhythm, pitch’
Consistent speed, normal volume, well-paced rhythm, and normal pitch are important to maintain audience interest. You will create subconscious barriers if you speak too quickly, your pitch is too high, your rhythm is not consistent, and so on. It is very common for those new to public speaking to speak too quickly. You can correct this by breathing deeply and taking regular pauses. Perform your proposed speech into a tape recorder and try to analyse your voice objectively. It will help you identify any major faults (such as too many ums or ahs, monotone delivery, too fast, too slow) and give you a base from which to work.

Coping with nerves
Some people thrive on that feeling of butterflies in the stomach; for others, it can prove to be a disincentive to performance. Research into optimal athletic performance suggests that a certain level of adrenaline is required for optimal performance. This is also true in the oral performance scenario. You need to have some nerves to have the energy - it’s managing them that’s important. As Lockyer and Kaczmarek suggest, you need to ‘turn your fear into energy’! (2007, p.342)

Some nerve management tips
1. Eat something. Try having a banana or piece of toast about half an hour before you speak. It will fill your stomach.
2. Breathe deeply and rhythmically, using your diaphragm.
3. Visualise. Imagine giving the presentation, it being successful, and your feeling of pleasure that it is over and went well. Imagine the audience asking you questions, and you answering them in full. It will help you relax, and will also help you anticipate what the audience may want to know.
4. Smile (make it a big one) and engage the audience by making eye contact. It will help them warm to you and your message.
5. Focus on your subject. Your audience is there to hear the information that you are presenting.

6. Pause. A well-timed pause will keep the audience interested, and allow you to gather thoughts, or have a drink of water. Like pauses in grammar, a pause in speech creates emphasis on specific elements of your talk.

7. Speak slowly and clearly. One page of written speech (single spaced) should take about one minute to read. Any quicker than this, and you are going too fast. Practice this with your speech before you create your notes, and mark your timings on your notes to help you pace yourself.

8. Place a watch in front of you so that you are aware of the time. If you see that you are running out of time, announce it yourself - don’t let it be a surprise.

9. Remember that this is your presentation, and you are the one with the ‘floor’.

Ultimately, nothing is better than knowing your topic, really really well. This is particularly important if your audience are also experts.

Interacting with ‘your crowd’

Thinking on your feet

‘Just think on your feet’ is very much easier said than done. It doesn’t matter how many times you may have practised in the mirror - if you get thrown off track during your presentation by a distraction, it can be difficult to regain your composure. This is often related to nerves, but could be related to anger, humiliation, or surprise. Whatever the case, there are some strategies that you can practice for that moment. These include having some key phrases up your sleeve, such as “Thanks for that comment. I will get back to that in a moment”, “I’m not sure of the answer, but I will find out for you and get back to you later, if you would like to leave your details with me at the end of the presentation”. Ensure that you follow up on your statements. Avoid getting into a debate that takes you away from the topic at hand, and always have a glass of water nearby - it will help you to pause and take a breath if you need to compose yourself.

Practice, practice, and more practice

Practice cannot be overemphasised. You must rehearse for an important presentation. By doing this, you will:

• confirm your own knowledge; and
• identify gaps in your knowledge prior to the event.

Confidence, or the appearance of confidence, is a key indicator of success in business. How many times have you seen it for yourself? That occasion where someone got away with something because they were so blatantly confident. For some, confidence comes naturally, and for others, it is something that must be learned. If you are unsure of what you are saying, or become easily flustered because you lose your way and cannot recover, you won’t look confident and your audience may then lose confidence in you. You can promote confidence through practice:

1. Write out your speech.
2. Read your speech aloud in full at least five times.
3. Make notes from your written speech.
4. Make your speech from your notes.
Only really experienced speechmakers can pull off giving a speech completely without notes, and even then you’ll find that they often have notes as support.

Do not simply read your speech. Your voice may flatten and become toneless, you will not look at the audience, and your use of engaging body language will be restricted. The potential result? A bored and uninterested audience.

**Audience participation**

A speech or presentation will be more effective if you engage the audience.

“Getting the audience to think and talk can meet many objectives...such as establishing a relaxed mood, arousing interest, making concepts meaningful, and providing variety” (Wallace, Schirato & Bright, 2001, p.222).

As technical communicators, your presentation will often be on extremely ‘dry’ subject matter, and you need to consider ways to include the audience so that you are sure that they understand your topic. You can engage your audience by:

• asking questions;
• prompting questions;
• suggest group feedback on your proposal (give them five minutes in a group, for example, to come up with some questions);
• discussing scenarios and case studies.

How you engage your audience will depend largely on the type of presentation. For example, a training presentation may be enhanced if your audience is engaged in group activities, but this would not be appropriate when giving a persuasive speech to a large audience. Your choices will ultimately be affected by your purpose, type of audience, and situation.

We have now discussed oral presentations. You should now do the readings and exercises to complete this lesson. In our next lesson we will be looking at non-verbal communication.

**REFERENCES**


You should do the following exercise.

Write a one page speech trying to convince the audience that they should take up a new hobby: “Why my passion should be your passion”.

Your speech should have an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Once you have written your speech, you should make notes that will support your speech when you make it.

You should submit your written speech and your notes.

Internal students should submit this exercise to their tutor in class. External students should submit this with Assignment 2 in Week 12.

Note that at this stage, punctuation and grammar is increasingly important, and your submissions will be failed/discounted if they do not meet basic grammatical standards. If you are having problems, you should contact your tutor (internal students) or the Course Coordinator (external students).

You should now visit the course website to access web-based links and readings, and to discuss any thoughts you have on this lesson. The website address is in your course profile, or can be accessed via http://e-courses.cqu.edu.au